THE JOURNEY
September 11, 2005

JOHN M. BUCHANAN, PASTOR
FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Psalm 111
Exodus 14:5–14

"Do not be afraid, stand firm, and see the deliverance that the Lord will accomplish for you today."
Exodus 14:13 (NRSV)

Thou art the life, by which alone we live,
And all our substance and our strength receive;
Sustain us by thy faith and by thy power,
And give us strength in every trying hour.

Our hope is in no other save in thee;
Our faith is built upon thy promise free;
Lord, give us peace, and make us calm and sure,
That in thy strength we evermore endure.

John Calvin, 1551

Twenty years ago, the Sunday morning when I began officially, it was September 8 and one of the hottest days of the year, B.A.C. (before air conditioning), I recall. I had chosen for a text, and a sermon I called "The Journey," the story we just heard from the 14th chapter of the book of Exodus. If there is a single most important Bible story, this just may be it. Scholars tell us that the Exodus, the saga of the people of God being led by God and God's man, Moses, from slavery into the wilderness for forty years and then finally across the river into the promised land, contains within it all the major themes and motifs of the rest of the Bible. Walter Brueggemann calls it the "primal saving event." It sets forth the idea that God calls people from slavery to freedom, that God provides, that God chooses men and women, that God will never abandon, and that, therefore, there is nothing to fear. All those ideas will come to full fruition in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Frederick Buechner, in a book I pulled from the shelf because of its relevance to our theme today and because it is one of my favorites, *The Sacred Journey*, writes:

> All theology is at heart autobiography. . . . What a theologian is doing essentially is examining as honestly as he (or she) can the rough and tumble of his own experience with its ups and downs, its mysteries and loose ends.

This story is the autobiography of God's people and, in an amazing way, as is always the case with the Bible, your autobiography and mine as well.

The twelve tribes of Israel are in Egypt because of a famine. At first they were refugees, guests. But over the years and decades, the Egyptians turned them into forced labor for Pharaoh's ambitious construction projects. They were slaves. They groaned under their oppression. They cried out to God. God heard their cries and sent Moses to set them free. After some tough negotiating and seven plagues, Pharaoh concedes, decides the Jewish slaves are no longer worth the trouble, and tells them to leave. And so they do: gather all the children and grandparents, all their livestock, all their belongings, and walk out—into freedom, sweet freedom. But it's also the wilderness. There's no food or water. They don't know where they are headed. When they arrive at the swampy wetlands known sometimes as the Sea of Reeds, sometimes as the Red Sea, they camp, and an unthinkable disaster looms. Back on the horizon they see the dust of an approaching army, chariots, horses, infantry. Pharaoh has changed his mind. And the people lose their nerve: "Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness?" Their courage and commitment to their future as a free people disappear. "It would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness."

That is autobiography. Life is like that. People are like that. At the critical moment we lose our nerve. Safety and security always seem preferable to the risks and dangers of commitment made in freedom.

In Joseph Ellis's fine biography of George Washington, a consistent theme is how Washington was a quintessential eighteenth-century English gentlemen who loved, and never wanted anything more in life, than the security and pleasant comforts of his life at Mt. Vernon as a Virginia squire. But time and time again, Washington said good-bye to his wife, his comfortable orderly life, to lead the almost impossibly dangerous and risky venture of freedom, to risk everything—property, reputation, life itself.

I never preside at a wedding without gratefully acknowledging the courage required for their commitment to hold to each other "in sickness and health, in joy and sorrow, as long as life lasts." They have no idea how this thing is going to turn out. As a matter of fact, we don't really know who the other is or will be in the future when we make that commitment. It is a great, biblical moment when a couple steps into that wilderness.

I never preside at the Sacrament of Baptism without gratefully acknowledging the depth and power of commitment that parenting requires and how a new, unexpected, and risky future is about to begin.

A new venture, a new career, a new home, a decision to commit to a relationship or to end a relationship—it all comes with risk, danger, uncertainty at the very least, and there isn't a one of us, in that situation, who doesn't say or think, "Why am I doing this? The past wasn't so bad. In fact, it was downright comfortable compared to what I'm getting myself into." "It would be better to be a slave in Egypt than to die in the wilderness."

At the heart of our tradition is the radical idea that God calls God's people into a new future, that God is the one who agitates and disturbs us and makes us uncomfortable with the status quo. It is God who calls us to be on a journey, always following with courage and commitment into an uncertain future.

That's how it goes for God's people in the old story. Moses leads them into —of all places—the water, and somehow they summon the courage to follow. They walk in as refugees, scared to death, wishing for all the world they were sitting around the fireplace in the old slave quarters. They walk in scared refugees, and they emerge on the other side a nation, a people with a new identity and a new sense of purpose and meaning. They will regress again and again; they will continue whining in the wilderness. But they will continue following, day after day, year after year, into their future.

As they looked back at it all, they could see the hand of God, but not at the moment. At the moment they were too busy dealing with the immediacies of threat, danger, and uncertainty. It was years later that they realized God's gracious leading.

God's relationship to the world and to the events of human history is always the question. And it is asked urgently and pointedly when disaster strikes: in birth defects, malignancy, plane crash, terrorist attack, hurricane. Did God do it? If so, why? Did God simply observe it? What does God have to do with it? Some are always quick to respond that God visits disaster on human beings to punish them for immorality and misdeeds. Somewhere someone is blaming immorality for the utter tragedy of New Orleans. I do not believe it for a minute. I do not believe God causes human suffering. What I believe is that God is involved in human history in deep and mysterious ways. I believe accidents happen—accidents that derive from nature and tragedy that derives from human ignorance or human sin. What I also believe is that there is no event, no chance accident or seemingly arbitrary tragedy—9/11

or this current natural disaster—that God cannot use and through which God cannot speak to us.

God calls each of us, whoever we are, wherever we are on our journey, however old or young we are—God calls us to live into the future with courage and hope. God calls this church, I deeply believe, to a deeper commitment to the future—with courage and hope and compassion and generosity and a passion for God's kingdom on earth. Our particular future at the moment is not clear. We have a vision—a hope, a plan—and, looking backward, a confidence that God will lead and God will provide.

God calls us, as a people and as individuals, to commitment and to courage —and to trust.

The one word God always speaks is "Fear not. I will be with you." From beginning to end, from Abraham's and Sarah's call to Moses' burning bush: Fear not." From the people peering into the wilderness to the harrowing journey through the sea: "Fear not." From shepherds on the hillside to a woman encountering a stranger beside an open tomb early on a Sunday morning: "Fear not."

"Do not be afraid. . . . I am with you"—it is the one word God speaks always and forever. And it is a saving word, a redeeming word, the one word we, all of us, need to hear: refugees from a natural disaster, totally cut off from the past, facing a new and unknown future; families and loved ones, victims —of hurricanes, terrorist attacks, military action. It is a saving word for the one facing a new job, a new adventure. It is a comforting word for the one facing surgery, critical illness, aging; an encouraging word for the newly married, new parents; a hopeful word for the newly unemployed, unattached: "Fear not. Stand firm. I am with you."

Looking forward and backward at his own journey, Buechner writes, "What quickens my pulse now is the stretch ahead rather than the one behind."

My sentiments precisely.

Wendell Berry, Kentucky farmer, author, and poet, has a new collection of poems, *Given*.

Here is one that seemed to suggest itself for this text and this day.

> The question before me, now that I
> am old, is not how to be dead,
> which I know from enough practice,
> but how to be alive, as these worn
> hills still tell, and some paintings

> of Paul Cezanne, and this mere
> singing wren, who thinks he's alive
> forever, this instant, and may be.
> (*Given*, p. 100)

How to be alive? The question for Fourth Presbyterian Church, for you, for me.

Do not be afraid.
Stand firm.
I am with you.

Thanks be to God.

TOLLING THE BELLS
September 11, 2005

Four years ago this morning, the world changed. Even as we deal with another national tragedy in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, the memory of September 11 is still vivid. We remember where we were, what we were doing, how we responded. The wound is deep, and so is the pain.

It is appropriate today to remember—

Those who died and their loved ones who miss them still

Those who died and continue to die in the aftermath: 2,123 U.S. soldiers and Marines in Iraq and Afghanistan, Iraqi and Afghan leaders, police, civilians

And so we pray for peace — for God's guidance that the policies and plans and actions of our nation will move the world toward God's dream of peace on earth, justice and goodwill among all.

As the bell tolls, let us remember those who have died. And, in silence, let us pray for peace.